Immigration: Rubio’s path to presidency?

In media blitz retorting conservative critics, he aims to sell bill and self

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Of the four Democratic and four Republican senators who wrote the immigration reform proposal now in Congress, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio has taken on the starring role as the most aggressive salesman for the 884-page bill.

On one recent Sunday, he appeared on seven national talk shows — five in English, two in Spanish. So omnipresent has he been in defending the draft he helped write, that at times he seems to be fronting the bill for both parties, not just his own.

Casting Rubio in that role makes sense. Republicans, both in Congress and nationwide, need more convincing on immigration reform than Democrats. And Rubio is the only one of the eight considered a serious contender for the presidency and who can benefit most from the exposure.

But his performance has brought him bad reviews from a number of high profile members of his own party and has raised a question: How will the immigration issue play with the conservative Republican base during the 2016 presidential primary season?

Many Republicans back immigration reform because they say that without it the GOP will lose the Latino vote by large margins — as they did in November’s presidential vote, 71 to 27 percent — and that they will continue to lose national elections. But some conservatives have disagreed stridently. They have attacked the bill, especially the section that provides a path to citizenship for the undocumented. At times they have criticized Rubio personally.

Rubio is responding with a constant flow of emails defending the legislation, an aggressive campaign called “Myth vs. Fact.” Journalists and others on Rubio’s email list have been deluged with messages — as many as nine in one day — in which he rebuts criticisms of immigration from both the right and the left.

A darling of the tea parties since he ran for Senate in 2010, Rubio has waged his online disputes mostly with other conservatives.
“Rubio’s making strategic choice, a gamble,” says political scientist Charles Zelden of Nova Southeastern University. “He’s pushing the envelope of the conservative base of the Republican Party. He’s asking that base to leave its comfort zone and gambling that he can take that base with him on the immigration issue.”

A couple of iconic conservatives, anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist and conservative Christian leader Ralph Reed, have joined forces with Rubio. But Rubio has irritated other well known conservatives, who have taken to the media to bash the bill.

One of the most insistent critics has been GOP Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, who was quoted April 17 by Bloomberg News. “There will be 11 million, maybe more, given immediate amnesty,” Sessions said.

Rubio shot back at Sessions in a “Myth vs. Fact” email blast.

“No one gets amnesty,” he wrote. “Illegal immigrants who qualify for temporary legal status must pay stiff fines, undergo background checks and pay taxes. After 10 years and if all the border security and enforcement triggers are met, then they go to the back of the line for a green card.”

The next day, GOP Senator David Vitter of Louisiana took a shot at the bill in an interview with conservative talk show host Laura Ingraham.

“Say somebody has been here illegally for 12 years and the proponents of this bill say they have to prove that and prove they didn’t leave the country,” Vitter said. “Well, no one in that position can prove that in a meaningful way month-to-month. So, it’s obvious that proof requirement is going to be a very low bar.”

Again, Rubio fired back, called Vitter’s position a myth and answered with what he said was hard fact.

“There is not ‘a very low bar’ for proof of residency,” he said. “Instead, there are a series of tough tests over the course of a decade to ensure that only eligible illegal immigrants receive legal status under the immigration proposal.”

Rubio proceeded to enumerate the numerous steps he mentioned in the Sessions email.

The same day Vitter was quoted, conservative pundit Anne Coulter joined the fray when she published an op-ed piece on the Human Events website titled, “If Rubio’s Amnesty Is So Great, Why Is He Lying?”

Coulter made fun of the immigration bill’s border security provisions. Specifically, she criticized the clause that says if the Department of Homeland Security does not meet border security provisions within five years, a special commission will be formed to direct security. Coulter implied such a commission would be a joke.

Rubio wasn’t laughing in his response. In yet another email blast, he said the Senate bill requires that DHS to have 100 percent of the border under constant human and/or electronic surveillance in five years and have a 90 percent success rate in stopping people trying to enter the U.S. illegally along heavily trafficked stretches of the border.

“The true strength of the commission comes from $2 billion appropriated for the commission that can only be spent by DHS on whatever the commission prescribes to secure the border,” Rubio responded said. “For example, if the commission recommends 200 additional miles of fencing, the secretary of Homeland Security will be compelled to implement the recommendation. He or she will not be able to divert resources to other projects.”
In another attack, Rubio was accused by the conservative Wall Street Journal of padding the bill to provide some pork for Florida. On April 21, the newspaper wrote that Rubio had inserted in the immigration bill a favor for the cruise line industry, which brings billions of dollars annually to Florida. The Journal said the bill would allow foreign workers to come to the U.S to repair cruise ships that were made abroad.

“There’s nothing in the legislation that is exclusively designed for cruise ship repair workers,” Rubio’s office shot back. “However, there is a provision Rubio suggested to make it easier for foreign workers to come to the U.S. for 90 days in the case of natural disasters or other emergencies. Of course, natural disasters and other emergencies are not exclusive to Florida.”

Other conservatives such as commentator Michelle Malkin, Matthew Boyle of Breitbart News and the officials at the Federation for American Immigration Reform, have also attacked the bill and have been rebuked by Rubio.

But Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner believes that Rubio is making a smart and necessary move. Wagner says Rubio could not have challenged conservative positions against gun control and raising taxes — and he hasn’t. But immigration is not as fiercely held a position, Wagner says.

“Rubio needs an issue to distinguish himself from the field if he’s going to be a serious contender,” Wagner said. “Immigration is not a moralistic issue in the Republican Party. It’s not as risky as it seems now.”

Zelden says Rubio, a first-term senator, has the example of another former first-term senator who became president that he can emulate: Barack Obama.

“For Obama, the issue that distinguished him was his opposition to the war in Iraq,” says Zelden. “That was not a commonly held position back then and that was what created the buzz around him. For Rubio, it’s immigration.”

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IMMIGRATION PROPOSAL — KEY ELEMENTS

Legalization

- **Green cards, citizenship:** Most of the 11 million undocumented could apply for a green card after 10 years and citizenship three years after that. Applicants must pay $2,000 in fines and back taxes, learn English, remain employed and pass a criminal background check.
- **Arrival date:** Immigrants must have arrived in the U.S. before Jan. 1, 2012.
- **Dream Act:** Dream Act youth can obtain green cards in five years and citizenship immediately thereafter.

Border Control

- **Borders:** The Department of Homeland Security will receive $3 billion to improve border security through surveillance drones and 3,500 additional customs agents; $1.5 billion for fencing.
- **Enforcement:** Within five years, DHS must achieve 100 percent surveillance of the southwest border with Mexico and catch 90 percent of people trying to cross illegally in high-risk sectors.
• **E-verify:** U.S. companies must implement the “E-verify” computer tracking system to confirm that workers are legal. All non-citizens will be required to show “biometric work authorization card” or “biometric green card.”

**Family visa program**

- **Relatives:** Allows unlimited visas per year for foreign spouses, children and parents of U.S. citizens and permanent legal residents.
- **Skills:** Eighteen months after the law takes effect, eliminates visas reserved for foreign brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens, and married children over 30. Creates new merit-based visa category using point system based on family ties and work skills.